

## Sold at First Sight



Photographs by Deborah Schondorf Novick

**OBSCURING THE HOUSE** On the advice of their home-staging team, Amy Chosky and Joseph Cohn had a tall hedge and a large evergreen tree removed before they put their four-bedroom Cape Cod in Larchmont, N.Y., on the market. After Ms. Chosky and Mr. Cohn planted smaller shrubs, put down sod and touched up the exterior paint, their house sold in five days and for more than its asking price of \$818,000.

By [VIVIAN MARINO](#)  
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**HOT** real estate markets don't sizzle forever. After more than three years of feverish demand in and around New York, the inventory of unsold homes is piling up, especially in the suburbs.

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Alan Zale for The New York Times

**GREEN MAGIC** Kitty Schwartz, of Classic Home Staging, grows her own props.

In Rockland County alone, the number of houses on the market has doubled from last year, to around 1,400, according to Thano Schoppel, an agent at the Joyce Realty office in Nyack.

And with so much to choose from, brokers say, buyers are getting much pickier.

"I had one buyer recently drive up to a house, where the exterior was very drab and had no landscaping, and say, 'Next!' without even going in," Mr. Schoppel said. "Buyers looking at 8, 10, 12 houses in one price range will go with a house with the most amenities in the interior and exterior."

This shift in market psyche means that now more than ever home sellers and their brokers must make a good first impression by enhancing that all-important "curb appeal" — the comely front porch or neat rows of impatiens or hydrangeas that beckon buyers to take a look inside. Some people are getting help from landscapers, while others are turning

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Before her father-in-law's colonial, top, went on the market in Montclair, N.J., Cristina Ryan replanted the yard.

to professional home stagers or stylists to conjure up that extra outdoor pizzazz.

It's not happening just in the suburbs, either. Barbara Brock, owner of A Proper Place, a home-staging business based in [Manhattan](#), says that she works just as hard on a condominium terrace as she does on a living room.

But, alas, being far from a big nursery or garden center poses some challenges for city stagers. A few weeks ago, for example, Ms. Brock was staging a large terrace on the Upper East Side.

"There was a wonderful hedge of bushes," she said, "but one of them was brown. Instead of removing it and trying to find another hedge, we spray-painted it green. It looked terrific."

Landscape architects and real estate brokers and appraisers agree that the exterior appearance and landscaping not only distinguish one house from another on the market but also enhance the resale value and, in many cases, seal a deal faster.

"Good landscaping could add up to 15 to 20 percent to the value," said Nancy C. Somerville, the executive vice president of the American Society of Landscape Architects, citing a number of studies over the last few years. "Conversely, if the landscape is poor, you could expect a sale price of 8 to 10 percent below comparable homes with good landscaping."

Cristina Ryan and her husband, Paul, who are working to sell his ailing father's four-bedroom colonial in Montclair, N.J., are hoping that attention to landscaping will pay off.

The couple knew that the house's renovated kitchen and bathroom, new moldings and refurbished hardwood floors would turn a few buyers' heads, but they understood, too, that unless the outside looked inviting, some of those buyers might never venture inside. So, in the weeks before the house was listed earlier this month at \$532,500, they had the front yard cleaned and weeded and all the overgrown or dying shrubbery replaced with \$700 worth of new bushes, flowers and ornamental grasses. The exterior was also power-washed and painted.

“It definitely makes the house look so much better,” said Ms. Ryan, a lawyer, who is overseeing the sale. “I think it will make more people stop and want to look inside.”

Not all outside projects have the same potential payback. One of the more recent landscaping studies, conducted by Laval University in Quebec and published four years ago in *The Journal of Real Estate Research*, found that landscaped patios added 12.4 percent to the market value of a house, while hedges used as fences added just 3.6 percent.

And different buyers want different things. The Quebec study found that retirees generally preferred yards with plenty of trees, which have the added value of helping to reduce energy bills by blocking summer sun and winter winds. Younger adults, it said, preferred more lawn.

“Design is a very personal statement,” said David Kamp, a Manhattan landscape architect, explaining that he typically gets his business from homeowners just after they have bought rather than before they plan to sell.

Perceived value also differs by neighborhood. Real estate appraisers take outside improvements into account when determining value. But a pool in [the Hamptons](#) might be more in demand and therefore more valuable than one, say, in [Queens](#).

“You want to be similar to your neighbor — maybe a little bit nicer,” said Richard D. Powers, president of the Appraisal Institute, a trade group for real estate appraisers. “But you don’t want to be the most overimproved house in the neighborhood because you don’t get money back.”

To create a neutral setting that will appeal to a broad range of tastes, some sellers use home stagers. The goal of staging is to draw attention to merits (like a quaint slate patio) while minimizing shortcomings (like a puny yard). Staging the exterior of the house can be as simple as adding flowers and rearranging the patio furniture or as elaborate as putting up a pergola or installing a fishpond.

In the process, cracks are patched and surfaces cleaned or repainted. “If the outside is unkempt,” said Roberta Baldwin, a broker at Re/Max Village Square in Upper Montclair, “people will wonder if that will carry over into the house.” Ms. Baldwin is representing the Ryan family.

Some stagers choose to do the digging and planting themselves, while others work with a landscaper or gardener. A homeowner can expect to spend \$150-plus for a basic

consultation, in which a stager evaluates the house and submits a report on what needs to be done. If the stager does all the work, the homeowner may spend \$1,500 or more.

A few brokers, like Ms. Baldwin, may also provide home-styling services as part of their regular commission. Others may absorb some of the cost of the staging.

At the suggestion of their home-staging team, Amy Chosky and her husband, Joseph Cohn, had all the overgrown hedges and a large evergreen tree removed from the front of their four-bedroom Cape Cod in Larchmont, N.Y., last fall, and instead planted smaller shrubs like holly and azaleas. They also added sod in the front and did some touch-up exterior painting. The goal was to highlight a pretty front porch that had until then been largely hidden.

“We had lived in that house for 10 years and never really thought about the bushes,” Ms. Chosky said. “Removing them not only opened up the front of the house but also brought more light inside.”

The house sold above its \$818,000 asking price just five days after it was listed in February, Ms. Chosky said. She estimated that she and her husband spent around \$3,000 for the landscaping work, including a home-staging design plan prepared by Deborah Schondorf Novick and Jill Steinberg, partners in a company called Showcase Your Space, in Larchmont.

It was difficult to pinpoint what specifically sold the house — the yard, the welcoming front porch, the granite kitchen countertops or maybe just the right price. “I think it was a combination,” Ms. Chosky said.

But the staging could not have hurt. “Nobody would have even noticed the house because of the large bushes,” Ms. Novick said.

At this time of year especially, most professional home stagers are focusing as much on flower beds as they are on bedrooms. “They’re equally important,” said Barb Schwarz, founder of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals. “Just like we can’t leave out the living room and the dining room, we can’t leave the outside out.” The association’s three-day training course devotes half a day to staging outside, Ms. Schwarz said.

Even developers may not always grasp the importance of how the yard and the exterior look. Kitty Schwartz, who runs Classic Home Staging, which works primarily in

[Westchester](#) and Putnam Counties in New York and Fairfield County in [Connecticut](#), recalled a ranch house recently on the market. “The builders had done nothing on the outside,” she said. “I told them that we needed to address that issue, and they said that they would just give the buyer a \$5,000 credit for landscaping at the closing.”

She persuaded them to do the work instead. “I went to the nursery and with them picked out a variety of plants, which cost \$1,000, and when it was all planted, it was gorgeous,” she said. “They didn’t have to give the \$5,000 credit.”

Throughout the region, home stagers and landscapers alike are now reporting an increase in demand for their services.

Ms. Ryan, the Montclair seller, said she couldn’t even find a landscaper, so she ended up doing all the planting at her father-in-law’s house herself. “I called 15 different landscapers,” she said, “and only one called me back to say that he didn’t work in our area.” (So far, the house has attracted some interest but no offers, the broker, Ms. Baldwin, said.)

If landscapers are busy, so are stagers. “I went through a slower time with my business at the beginning of the summer,” Ms. Schwartz said, “but it has really picked up lately.”

She expects to become even busier as the summer wears on and homes remain unsold. Sellers have still been hoping for a repeat of last year, she said.

Like many other home stagers, Ms. Schwartz keeps storage rooms filled with props, including benches and wicker furniture, that can be quickly placed outside a client’s house to create little vignettes illustrating what life could be like there. She also cultivates a small garden of flowers and plants at her home for use throughout the year.

“The winter is really challenging,” she said, “but some people have to put their homes on the market in the middle of winter, so I have to think ahead and be ready. I keep enough for two or three houses.”

While flowers and plants are always popular, real estate agents say that finicky buyers are looking for other accouterments these days. “Becoming more and more important is the placement of large rocks, rock walls, stone fences and masonry in the landscaping,” said Mr. Schoppel, the Nyack agent.

Other popular trends in exterior décor are adding fountains, ornamental pools and

outdoor kitchens. “And it’s not just your little portable barbecue grill on the patio,” said Ms. Somerville of the landscape architects trade group. “They want the nice built-ins with seating.”

This growing focus on the outdoors seems to reflect shifting demographics. “The one thing that I’m finding is that people want a place where they can enjoy life with their family,” said Edmund D. Hollander, a landscape architect in Manhattan. “They want to play with the grandchildren in the swimming pool.”